Programs Branch User Report

Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada

Secretariat

Gayle Campbell
Statistics Division

Frank J. Porporino
Research Division

Len Wevrick
Statistics Division
Ministry of the Solicitor General

CHARACTERISTICS OF INMATES INVOLVED IN PRISON INCIDENTS

PHASE 1

NO. 1985-53

This working paper was prepared in 1985 and is made available as submitted to the Ministry. The views expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada. This working paper may not be published, cited or reproduced without permission of the Ministry.

This working paper is available in French. Ce document de travail est disponible en français.

INTRODUCTION

Correctional agencies in recent years have been perplexed with the problem of increased prison violence (Gibbs, 1981: Scharf, 1983). In particular, there is growing concern about the increasing numbers of long-term inmates (Langdon, 1984). A common belief is that long-term inmates are higher security risks and are more likely to become involved in violent prison incidents. The present study is an initial attempt to address this issue.

Although there has been considerable speculation about the causes of prison violence, little systematic research has been conducted to identify the characteristics of those inmates who are most likely to become involved in incidents of violence. This project will focus on the behaviour of long-term inmates within the federal correctional system in Canada, and the involvement of these individuals in prison incidents in comparison to the general inmate population. The first phase of the project provides a preliminary descriptive analysis of the characteristics of disruptive inmates through presentation of a series of population profiles.

The profiles were prepared for the Ministry Committee on Long-Term Imprisonment by the Offender Information Services of the Correctional Service of Canada. These profiles provide data for a specified inmate group at a given point in time. They were produced in order to become familiar with some of the idiosyncrasies of the data base and to help determine appropriate analyses for a major project.

The main project will consist of a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of those inmates involved in incidents of prison violence and, in particular, a comparison of inmates serving long-term versus shorter-term sentences. It will examine different types of incidents (e.g., self-inflicted injuries, assaults) and different types of involvement (e.g., as the aggressor or victim) thereby permitting some estimate of the probability that certain types of inmates will be involved in particular types of violence.

METHOD

The population profiles presented in this paper provide general offence and background data on a selected sample of the Canadian federal inmate population. The study sample consisted of all inmates who were involved in at least one violent or escape incident during the years 1980 to 1984. Five yearly snapshots were obtained for inmates involved in violent incidents and another five yearly snapshots for inmates involved in escape incidents. The escape and violence groups are not mutually exclusive in that one inmate may have been involved in both types of incidents. Finally, figures reflect the number of inmates involved in the specified incidents and not the number of incidents that occurred within the given year.

Violent incidents were defined according to the categorization of incidents used by the Preventive Security Division of Correctional Service of Canada. The incidents included: murder, attempted murder, assaults, inmate fights, hostage takings, major disturbances, suicide, attempted suicide, self-inflicted injury, arson and damage to government property. Escape incidents included all escapes and attempted escapes from penitentiaries or escorts.

Each profile provides aggregate offence and background data on inmates involved in these incidents. These can be examined nationally, as well as by region, security level or by institution. Factors examined included: age, major offence, sentence length, time served, marital status, race, religion, admission type, number of previous federal commitments, and province of residence.

The data were drawn from the Preventive Security and Offender Information Services' data bases. These data are subject to several limitations, although the extent of these limitations is unknown. Most stem from the inherent problems of maintaining and updating national data bases which rely on many information sources and data entry points. Inconsistency in reporting of incidents across institutions is probably the most serious flaw in the security incident base. Again, it is very difficult to assess the degree of inconsistency, but Preventive Security advises that by using only the recent years this problem should be minimized. It should be noted also that it is quite likely that under-reporting exists for the less serious incidents.

Other limitations of the data base derive from the fact that it was originally created to meet operational needs and, as such, does not necessarily accommodate all research requirements. Initially, the system was restricted to information which was routinely forwarded to National Headquarters. This procedure was capable of capturing the more serious prison incidents but was not adequately recording the less serious incidents. As a result, during 1983, Preventive Security conducted a system wide sweep of all institutional security records. This "sweep" collected security incident data on only those inmates who were in the

federal correctional system at that time, not historical data on inmates who had been released prior to 1983. As a result, data as of 1981 are fairly accurate but the data are most comprehensive as of 1983. Currently, data are updated and processed at the institutions and verified at National Headquarters.

RESULTS

The results are presented in the form of rates of participation in prison incidents and expressed per 1,000 total inmate population. Each rate represents the number of inmates, per 1,000 general inmate population, who were involved in an incident. Rates were calculated for each category of the different variables that were examined (e.g. age, sentence length). For example, looking at the age variable, if there were 25 inmates between 20 and 24 years old who were involved in a prison incident, and the number of all inmates within this age category was 500, then the rate of participation for this sub-population would be 50: (25/500 X 1000 base population)[1].

Violent and escape incidents are presented separately. The first four sets of figures present: rates of participation in violent incidents by: sentence length, major offence, time served and age. Brief comments with regard to: marital status, race, number of previous federal commitments, and admission type are included. The last set of diagrams presents rates of participation in escape incidents by sentence length.

Note: Rates were calculated using calendar year end inmate population figures for all years except 1983. For 1983, the inmate population used is that of June 30, since year end figures were not available.

I. PARTICIPATION IN VIOLENT PRISON INCIDENTS

Table 1 presents yearly figures for the total inmate population, the number of inmates involved in incidents of violence, and the rates of participation in violent incidents per 1000 inmates.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF INMATES INVOLVED IN INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE AND RATES OF PARTICIPATION BY YEAR (1981-1984)

	Total Inmate Population (year end)	Number Involved in Incidents of Violence	Rates of Participation (per 1000 inmates)
1981	10,148	920	90.7
1982	10,951	1,040	95.0
1983	11,494	1,362	118.3
1984	12,141	1,426	117.5

The rate of prison violence increased 30% from 1981 to 1983 and levelled off in 1984. Thus, it would appear that the concerns being voiced by the criminal justice field are valid and that this situation warrants examination.

Sentence Length

Figures 1-1 and 1-2 illustrate the relationship between participation in violent incidents and sentence length. The first graph compares the change over time (1981-1984) of participation

Figure 1-1

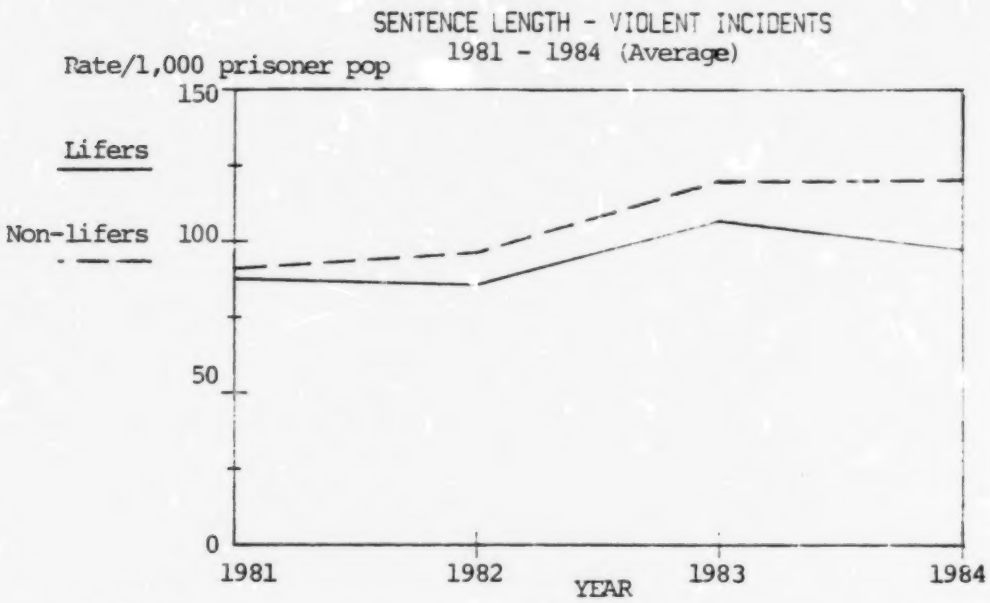
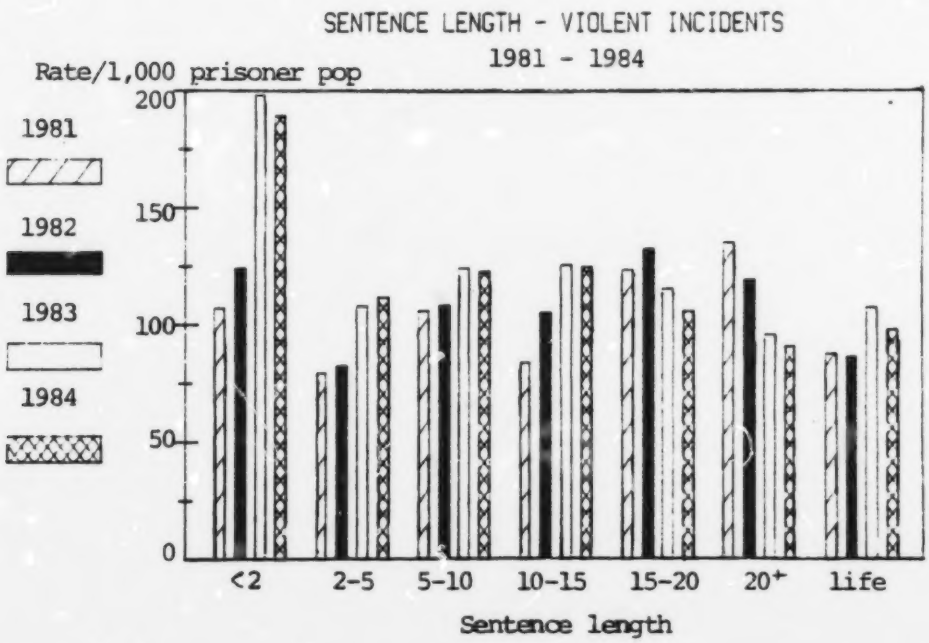


Figure 1-2



rates for those inmates serving life sentences versus those serving other definite sentences. Figure 1-1 shows that, over the time period examined, lifers had a consistently lower rate of involvement in violent incidents than inmates serving other sentences. Further, while the rate of participation has increased for both groups, the increase for those serving life sentences has not been as great.

Figure 1-2 shows the rates of participation in incidents of violence over time for different categories of sentence length. The most active sub-population is the group serving less than two years, consisting mainly of parole and mandatory supervision revocations. A shift has occurred, in that short term inmates (<2 years) have become very active, while longer term inmates (15-20+) have become much less active. Lifers have maintained a consistently below average level of participation. This tends to support the theory that long-term prisoners are a stabilizing factor within the institution. In future analyses, it will be interesting to examine whether the inverse relationship between sentence length and involvement in prison violence holds once the factors of age and time served have been controlled.

Major Offence

Figure 2-1 presents rates of participation in violent incidents by major offence. Major offence was grouped into four categories: violent, property, drugs and other; where violent offences included robbery. As was expected, inmates with violent major offences were the most active group. An unexpected finding was the dramatic increase in the rates for property offenders over the four year period. This steady increase suggests that the

Figure 2-1

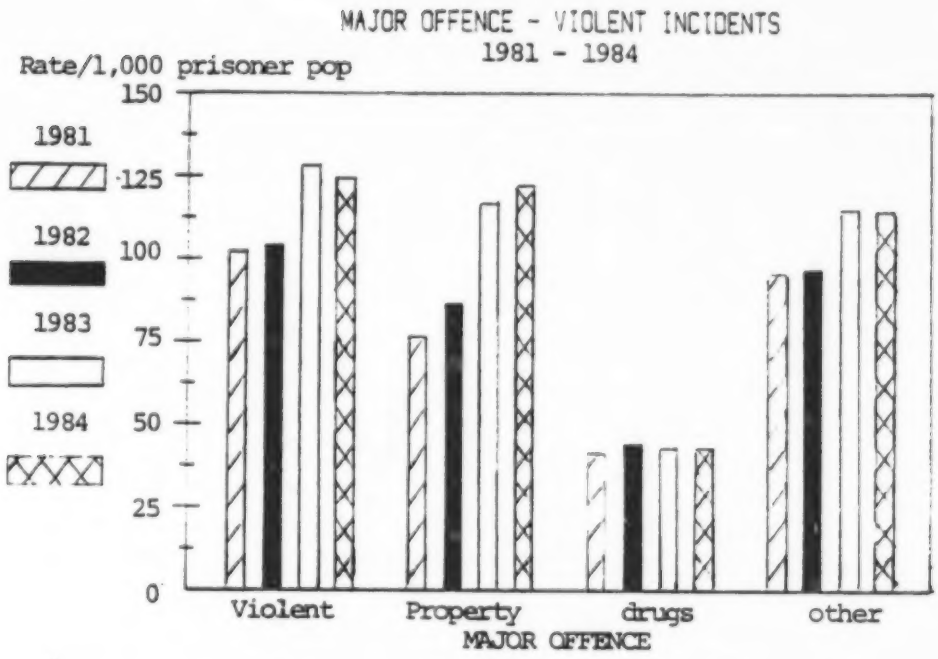
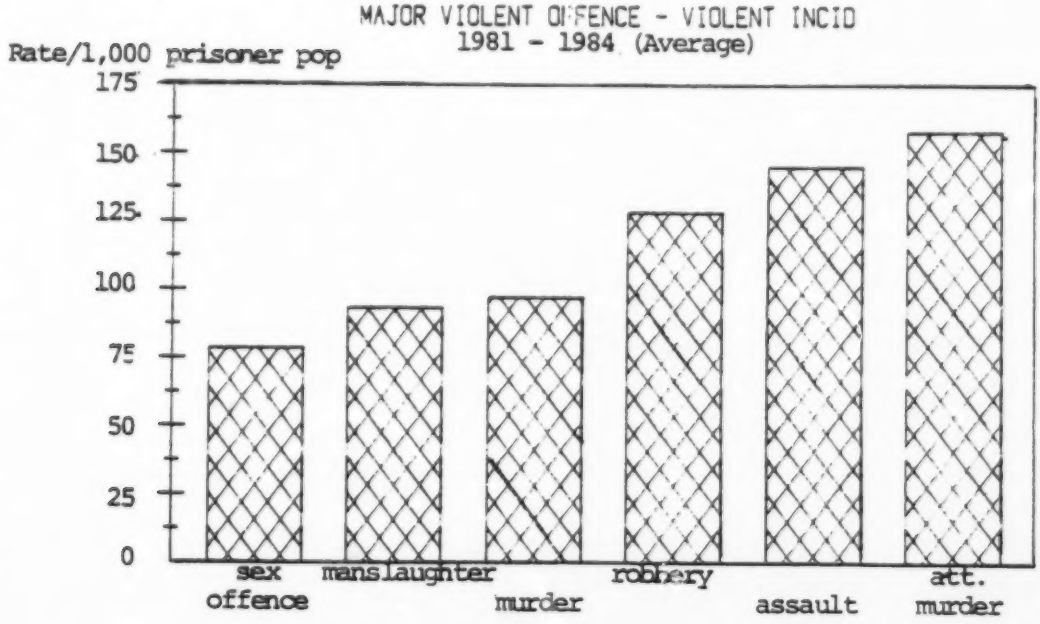


Figure 2-2



characteristics of the property offender may be changing and that they are now more likely to become involved in prison violence. Drug offenders have maintained stable and low rates of involvement in prison violence.

The second figure (2-2) presents a closer examination of inmate groupings by major violent offence. The most active offenders are those convicted of attempted murder, assault and robbery offences. By contrast, those convicted of murder, manslaughter and sexual offences show below average rates of involvement. It is noteworthy that the homicide offenders who are usually deemed most violent fell below the assaultive (nonfatal) categories (including attempted murder). Cross-tabulations with other factors may reveal that different and perhaps more complex relationships exist between major offence and participation rates in violent incidents.

Time Served

Time served measured the amount of time from date of admission to the federal correctional system to December 31st of the year in which the incident occurred. Although this way of measuring the time served variable is somewhat arbitrary, it does allow an adequate description of the relationship between the length of time served and participation in prison violence.

Figure 3-1 provides the average participation rate (1981-1984) by time served. A definite pattern emerges with the rate initially increasing with the amount of time served, peaking between 2 to 3 years and then gradually declining.

Figure 3-2 shows the yearly rates of participation by length of time served. There do not appear to be any significant

Figure 3-1

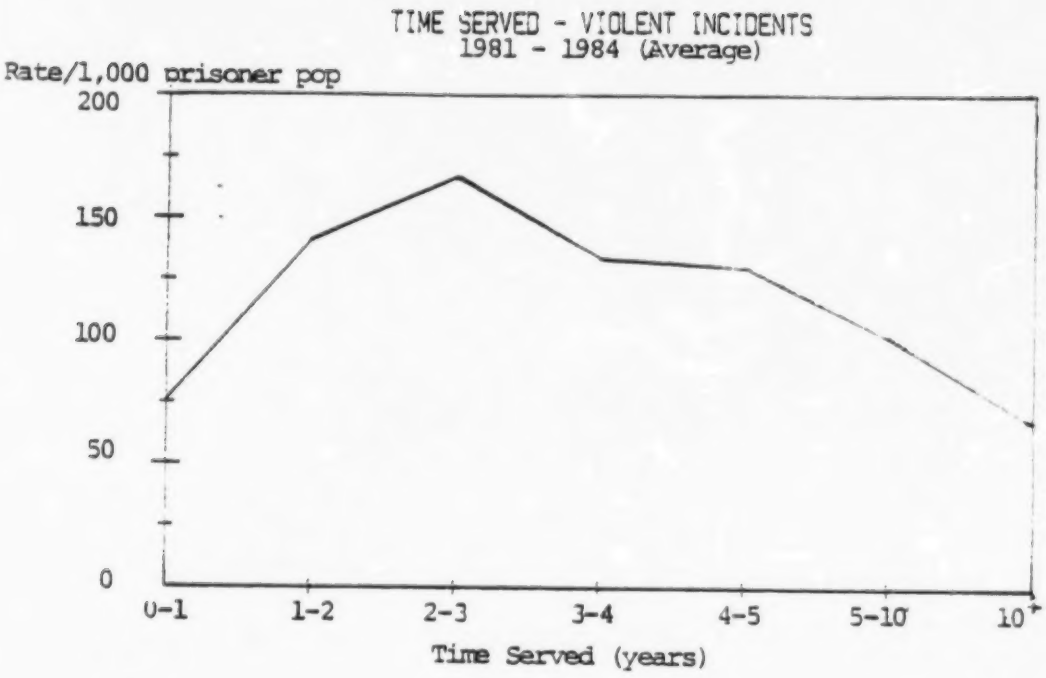
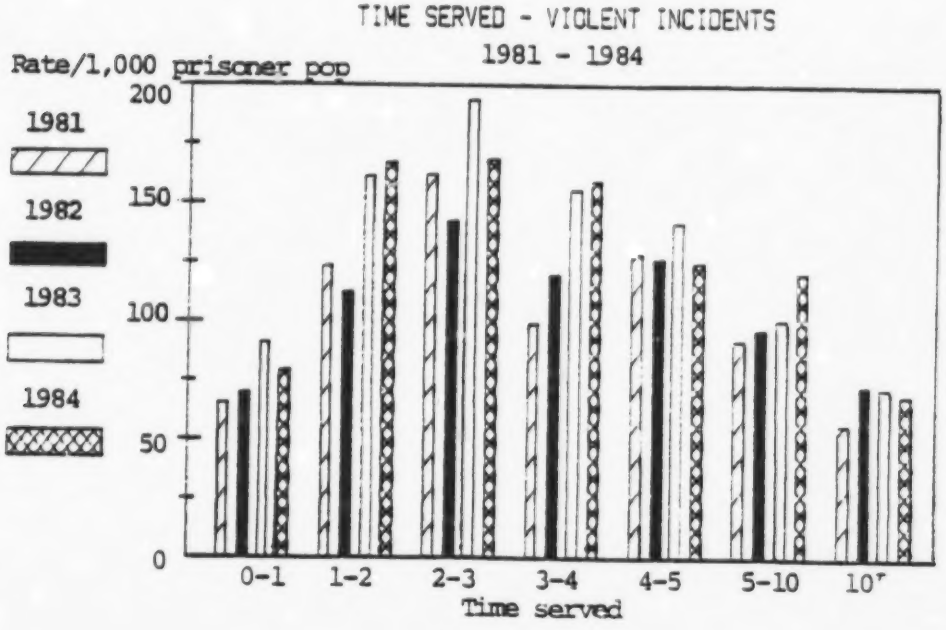


Figure 3-2



changes in the trend over the past years with the exception that for 1984, the peak period was between 1 and 4 years and those serving 5 to 10 years appear to have become more active than in previous years.

The findings that those who have served less than one year had lower participation rates in violent incidents are contrary to the theory that prisoners new to the system require a settling in period which often involves some form of reactive behaviour.

Age at Time of Incident

Age at time of incident was measured from December 31st of the year in which the incident occurred, not from the actual incident date.

Figures 4-1 and 4-2 describe the relationship between age and participation in prison violence . The first figure illustrates the generally accepted assumption that younger inmates are more likely to be involved in violent incidents. Figure 4-2 illustrates the yearly trends with no significant changes for any specific age category, although those aged 25 to 29 appear to have become increasingly more active relative to the rest of the population.

Other General Characteristics

Data on marital status, race, number of previous commitments and admission type were collected for 1984. The corresponding data are presented in Table 2.

Figure 4-1

Figure 4-2

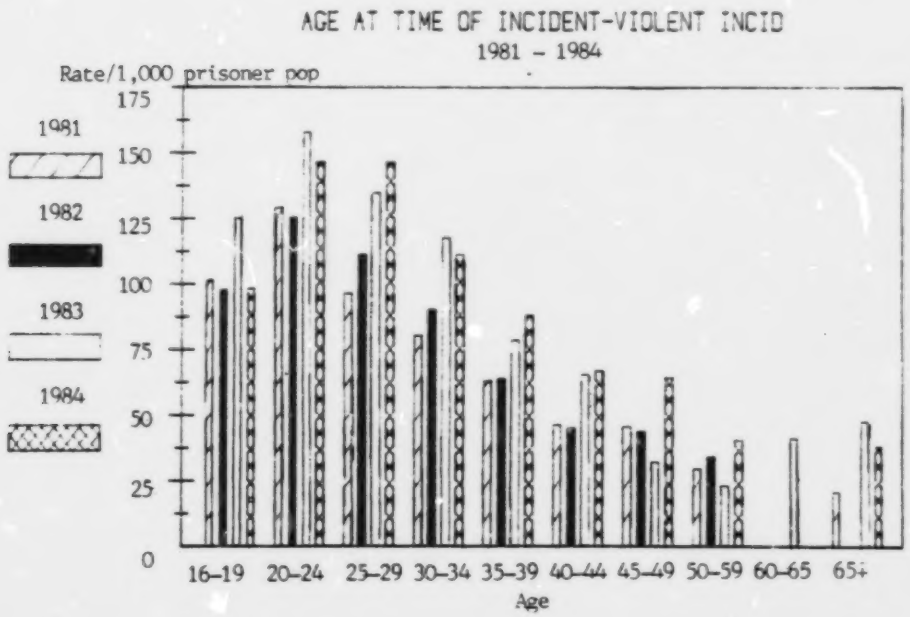


TABLE 2

NUMBER OF INMATES INVOLVED IN INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE AND RATES OF PARTICIPATION BY SELECTED BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS - 1984

	Number Involved in Incidents of Violence	Rate of Participation (per 1,000 inmates)
Marital Status		
Single	887	136.4
Married	108	70.3
Common-law	329	116.7
Widow	8	-*
Separated	43	96.0
Divorced	47	72.2
Not stated	4	-*
Race		
Caucasian	1,179	111.8
Natives	188	168.9
Other	59	124.2
Number of Previous Commitments		
0	769	99.5
1	282	134.5
2	190	158.2
3	92	169.4
4	47	159.3
5-9	45	164.2
10-15	1	-*
Admission Type		
Warrant of Committal	1,070	110.0
Parole Revocation	64	98.5
Parole Forfeiture	4	-*
Mandatory Supervision Revocation	199	186.7
Mandatory Supervision Forfeiture	12	230.8
Provincial Transfer	45	118.4
Federal-Provincial Contract	13	135.4
Other	19	215.9

* Number too small to calculate meaningful rate.

The figures suggest that single prisoners had nearly twice the rate of participation in violent incidents than those prisoners who were married, whereas common-law fell between these two.

Native Indians, Metis, Inuit and Blacks had significantly higher rates of violence than did other inmates.

The number of previous federal penitentiary commitments appears to be directly related to violence participation rates. Generally, the more previous commitments, the greater the participation rate.

In terms of admission type, those admitted for mandatory supervision revocations had much higher levels of participation in violent incidents. In contrast, those admitted with parole revocation were significantly below the average rate of participation. Those admitted on warrant of committal were slightly less active than the average rate.

It will be interesting to examine further these findings by controlling for such factors as the nature of the prison incident and the involvement of the inmate (victim or perpetrator).

II. PARTICIPATION IN ESCAPE INCIDENTS

Data on escapes were collected separately from violent incidents because it was not possible to differentiate between the violent and non-violent escape incidents. However, it was believed that even a general definition of escape incidents would be meaningful because of the important implications with regards to prison security and public perceptions. It should be noted

that the figures include both attempted and committed escapes. The overall participation rates in escapes and the rates by sentence length are reported.

Table 3 presents the number of inmates involved in escape incidents, the associated rates of participation and the total inmate population by year.

TABLE 3

NUMBER OF INMATES INVOLVED IN INCIDENTS OF ESCAPE AND RATES OF PARTICIPATION BY YEAR (1981-1984)

	Total Inmate Population (year end)	Number Involved in Incidents of Escape	Rates of Participation (per 1000 inmates)
1981	10,148	361	35.6
1982	10,951	327	29.9
1983	11,494	307	26.7
1984	12,141	353	29.1

A trend towards decreased rates of participation in prison escapes has occurred over the four year period. One reason for this decline may be increased preventive security measures.

Sentence Length

Figure 5-1 illustrates the different rates of participation in escapes for lifers and non-lifers. As with violent incidents, lifers generally had lower rates of participation than non-lifers. Although both lifers and non-lifers have shown declining rates of escape, the lifers have shown a greater decline.

The yearly trends for different sentence lengths are shown in Figure 5-2. Again, the pattern is similar to that of violent incidents. Over the years, those offenders with the shorter remnant sentences (2 years) have become increasingly more active while the longer-term prisoners have become less active (20+ years and life).

CONCLUSION

The inmate profiles presented in this paper provide only a preliminary view of prison incidents involving violence and escapes.

In general, the highest rates of involvement in prison violence were found in the following sub-groups:

1. those inmates serving a short term sentence;
2. convicted of a property or violent offence (particularly attempted murder, assault or robbery);
3. served between 1-4 years of their sentence;
4. aged 20-29;
5. single;
6. revocated while on mandatory supervision;
7. had one or more previous federal commitments; and were
8. Native Indian, Metis, Inuit or Black.

Figure 5-1

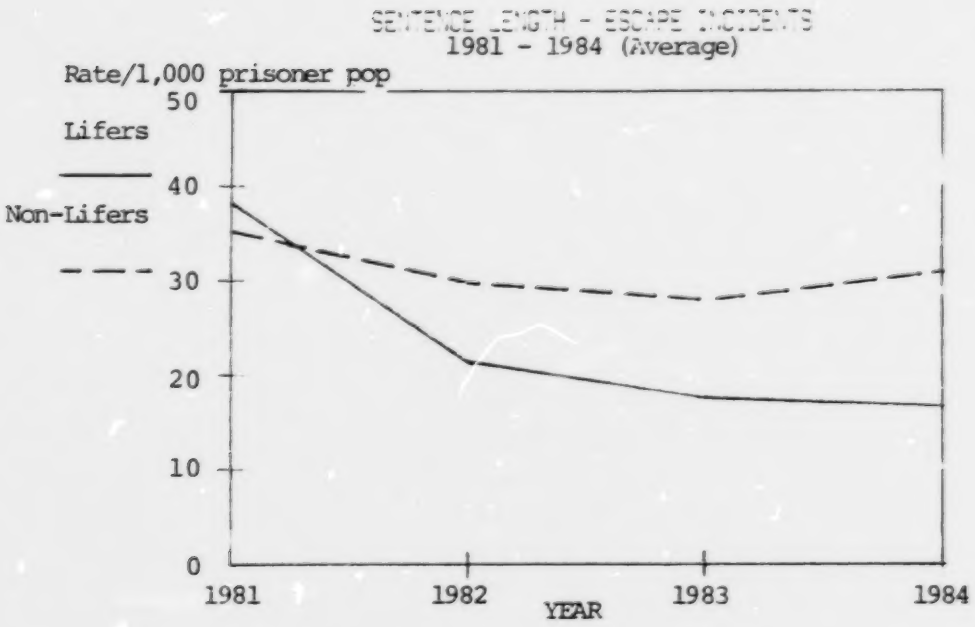
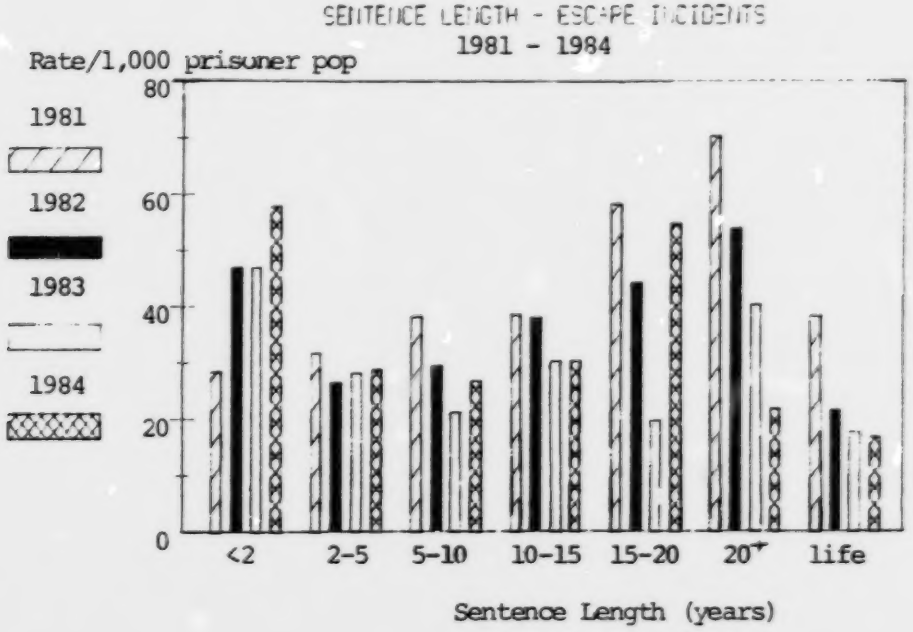


Figure 5-2



It should be noted that the above profile does not reflect the characteristics of the majority of participants. Rather, it represents those sub-populations with the highest likelihood of participating in an incident of violence.

From these results it is possible to determine appropriate analyses for the next phase of the project. Individual level data will be examined in an attempt to isolate to what extent different factors may be predictive of involvement in prison incidents. From the findings of the preliminary study, it might be expected that age, sentence length and previous criminal history account for much of the variance. Of course, this may vary according to the type of incident and the role of the participant (e.g., perpetrator or victim).

Despite the limitations of aggregate-level data, the findings of the present study suggest that long-term inmates do not present a greater risk for involvement in violent prison incidents than other groups. Specifically, in contrast to some other sub-groups (e.g., inmates serving less than two years), their rate of involvement in both violent prison incidents and in actual or planned escapes has remained fairly stable over the past four years. In particular, individuals serving life sentences for murder were found to have relatively low rates of involvement in violent prison incidents. For example, over the four year period examined, murderers had an average rate of involvement in violent prison incidents of 97 per 1,000. In contrast, individuals serving sentences for robbery had a rate of involvement of 128 per 1,000, and individuals serving sentences for assaultive offences, a rate of 149 per 1,000. These findings of a generally low rate of involvement in violent prison incidents among inmates serving long terms is consistent with previous research in other jurisdictions (Flanagan, 1980; Williamson and Thomas, 1984).

Institutional classification procedures in various jurisdictions tend to place heavy reliance on either the length of sentence or the seriousness of the offence in determining the need for a particular level of security supervision (Austin, 1984). Murderers are typically placed in maximum security settings. A perspective that considers the actual probabilities of involvement in violent prison incidents suggests that perhaps many long-term inmates could be assigned to less secure custody alternatives without any significant increase in the risk of violent prison disruptions.

REFERENCES

Austin, J. (1983) Assessing the new generation of prison classification models. Crime and Delinquency, 29, 561-576.

Flanagan, T.J. (1980) Time served and institutional misconduct: Patterns of involvement in disciplinary infractions among long-term and short-term inmates. Journal of Criminal Justice, 8, 357-367.

Gibbs, J.J. (1981) "Violence in prisons: Its extent, nature and consequences" in Critical Issues in Corrections. R.R. Roberg and V.J. Webb (Eds.), New York: West Publishing Co.

Langdon, A.J. (1984) Managing the long-term prison system: The Report of the Control Review Committee. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Scharf, P. (1983) Empty bars: Violence and the crisis of meaning in the prison. The Prison Journal, 53, 114-124.

Williamson, H.E. and Thomas, T.K. (1984) Prison misconduct among life-without-parole inmates. Paper presented at the meeting of Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Chicago, Illinois.